



**“Has regional cooperation led to the establishment of Balkania:  
Europe’s Southeastern Dimension?”**

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During the last decade there were many regional initiatives such as the Stability Pact and the Southeast European Cooperation Process aiming to establish strong linkage among countries in the Western Balkans, which in turn will bring lasting peace and stability to the region.. But we can hardly state that these regional arrangements have managed to build up strong “regional identity” which is a prerequisite for a sound regional cooperation as seen in other European regions, such as Scandinavia. Mainly, regional initiatives have focused on instant problem solving, rather than on launching a new long life quality for the region as a whole in economic and political sense. Thus, the regional cooperation phenomenon insofar has not produced any substantial results and sounds more like a good intention.

As a consequence of this reality, the emergence of the idea of a Scandinavia (i.e. Balkania) in Europe's South has however heated again Balkan's countries expectations.<sup>1</sup> This not only sounds good, but also it can become reality. So the question would be, could this happen and what that particularly means?

This analysis, discussing regional cooperation in the western Balkans region, seeks the answer to the more important and recently rumored question of the possibilities of establishing a Balkania in the South.

## **Balkania in Europe's South as Scandinavia in Europe's North**

Seeking for possible definition of regional cooperation, which is no doubt a buzzword nowadays, the “European” definition fits very well in the context of the

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, in his article at Dnevnik – a Macedonian daily – with the title “Balkania in South as Scandinavia in North”, Nikola Dimitrov, Macedonian former Ambassador to US, optimistically reminded on the significance of regional cooperation by quoting the prominent strategic analyst and former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who in the recent Adriatic Charter meeting held in Dubrovnik explored the idea of the establishment of “Balkania in South as Scandinavia in north”.

paper: “Regional cooperation is one of the consistent elements of European integration itself [and] serves to bring about peaceful cooperation, economic development and democratization and has therefore repeatedly been advanced and promoted by the EU as a successful example and development model for other regions of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

As to the regional identity, there are different approaches. They are usually focused on culture, language, historical background, but in the same time it can be simply political structures aiming towards same goals and looking for common future. Speaking about regional identity in terms of regional cooperation in the western Balkans, it is worth saying that it is much more a matter on “Cost – benefit” speculation (mainly towards the Euro–Atlantic integration) from being under the same political identity, rather than regional identity as an origin of common values and believes. In that sense, maybe is too much to expect some kind of “supranational identity” since “national identities in the Balkans, have been defined and have operated in opposition to each other. Thus, there has never been a common Balkan Identity”.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, although the western Balkan countries are at different levels of their economic and political development, the emergence of many different regional cooperation initiatives has fostered the process of regional cooperation itself and their role should not be underestimated in the establishment of sub-identities (such as Balkania) in the framework of overarching European identity. Still, the regional cooperation concept is not and should not be perceived as something “artificially” imposed since it has emerged naturally as a result of the need of unification of the standards of the countries in the region on their road to EU.

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe cited in : Carrots, sticks and norms: the EU and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe - Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans  
Volume 8, Number 1, April 2006 Council of the EU, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Maria Todorova, *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*. (NY: NYU Press, 2004).

## **Restructuring of the Regional Arrangements**

We can not, of course, make any conclusions on regional cooperation process in the western Balkans without considering so far experience of the regional initiatives, such as the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe and other initiatives.

The Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, established in 1999, following its almost a decade of lifetime, is to be transformed into Regional Cooperation Council, with its seat in the region itself. The Stability Pact was envisioned merely as a conflict prevention tool (emerging mainly under the pressure of then circumstances such as Kosovo war). The truth is that Stability Pact, from the very beginning faced many difficulties mainly because of not having its own legal entity that would ensure its funding. Instead of this, its functioning was merely through independently funded projects and initiatives. As the region itself started to move from mere post-conflict reconstruction to democratic reforms and to European integration inspired transformation processes, the Pact had to be transformed into “a more regionally owned and led co-operation framework”<sup>4</sup> that would meet the newest needs of the countries of the region in the light of forthcoming European integration and in the light of the need for the establishment of a space (Balkania) offering sub-regional identity to the countries of the region under the wider umbrella of the Europeanness.

The goal is sustaining focused regional cooperation in the region through a regionally-owned and -led framework, providing political guidance as to the future of the regional cooperation in the service of both European integration and building of a regional identity that will serve in various forms for the defense of the interests of the region as a whole and of the individual countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Statute of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). available at:  
<http://www.stabilitypact.org/rt/ZAGREBAnnextoConclusion sRCC.pdf>

Although some see Regional Cooperation Council as a “waiting room” until the next wave of EU Enlargement, its mission is completely justified. The formal handover from Stability Pact to RCC will take place in February 2008 and RCC is supposed to assume the responsibility of the Stability Pact for SEE and SEECP. Its members are the countries that share the same Euro–Atlantic ambitions and want to meet the requirements of EU regarding the progress in RC further development as a precondition for accession. Hopefully, Regional Cooperation Council will minimize the involvement of international community and will serve the countries in the region as a main link with international donor community. Besides just preserving the so far reached achievements, RCC will probably meet the international community’s expectations more than Stability Pact and will bring new quality in the regional cooperation.

Apart from the Stability Pact, which was, as previously mentioned envisioned more as “urgent measure” rather than a long term strategy, there were also other relevant initiatives each focused on different aspects of regional cooperation. One of these include Southeast European Cooperation Initiative and with its centre on combating organized crime and corruption. One of the biggest advantages that one can expect from regional cooperation initiatives is fight against the transnational crimes, such as trafficking of human beings, arms, drugs, etc. Supporting the fight against these kinds of cross-border crimes with the aim to improve the business environment and to attract investments was exactly the mission of the SECI and its organized crime center (SECI Centre with its base in Bucharest). Taking into account the regional aspects of trans-frontier crimes, the SECI centre served as a channel for efficient working relations between countries in the region. What made the SECI center unique is the fact it is the only regional organization that brings together police and customs representatives in pursuing the fight against crimes that goes beyond borders of one country. Despite the difficulties in aligning the different countries actions for pursuing various operations against organized crime in the region, the SECI centre has proven to be useful in the transition processes of the countries of the

region as well as in their future endeavors in the field. However, as the countries of the region are slowly but smoothly moving towards the European integration and thus integration into the Europol – European police – structures, the SECI centre will need to be gradually transformed into a structure that will facilitate the countries involvement in the Europol actions and initiatives.

Another initiative that has served the purpose of regional cooperation and the setting of common goals is the South East Europe Cooperation Process. The Process for the long time was seen as the sole regionally led and owned initiative. However, its work not going beyond the holding of the summits of the heads of state and government with declarations that has had no close follow up, questioned the political weight of the Process.

Most recently, what was hailed as a groundbreaking event was the extension of the Central European Free Trade Agreement to the countries of the western Balkans with the signing of the agreement by the countries in the region on 19 December 2006 in Bucharest. The CEFTA's service to its initial members such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic in the strengthening of the trade and in their integration into the EU, is also expected to serve the countries of the western Balkans. The true importance of the new CEFTA will lie not only in the integration of these countries into the EU, but also in its leverage to increase trade relations among these countries as it replaces already signed 32 bilateral free trade agreements. However, as the countries of the region despite the earlier existing free trade agreements among themselves and due to their heavy reliance to the EU market itself, not much should be expected for the economic growth of the region due to the establishment of the new CEFTA. What will make the new CEFTA successful is accelerating the opening of the EU markets as a whole to the products and services of the region.

**The question is what after all these more or less successful or unsuccessful initiatives? Are we now step forward closer to what can be define as Balkania in the South? Were there any lessons learned after all?**

In order to answer all these questions and to clash different arguments, we have challenged distinguished intellectuals, experts, professionals to speak up on regional cooperation “puzzle word” and to demystify its meaning through practical, case studies analyses and hypothesis.

Although, regional cooperation is usually seen as multipart model of cooperation incorporating relations in the fields of trade, energy and infrastructure on the equal basis with security and cross-border cooperation, unfortunately, the experiences show that it is more often identified with combating organized crime and cross–border cooperation rather than the above mentioned categories. This definitely reflects the Macedonian perspective of regional cooperation at least for now. The country has signed Agreements for cooperation in the fields of security, combating human trafficking and drugs, cross–border cooperation and visa regime with Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Protocol for cooperation with the Mission of UNMIK in Kosovo. The implementation of the bilateral agreements in this field is on two levels - Political and Operational. While, Governments are directly responsible for the political level, the operational level of implementation of these agreements occurs mainly through official meetings of the cross-border officials.

There is also a Commission for cross–border cooperation coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cross–border security cooperation process has been assisted by the Geneva Center for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Part of the DCAF’s Border Security Program in South Eastern Europe launched after the Ohrid Border Conference in Skopje in May 2003. The main aim of this program was to introduce and share “EU experience” with the five countries of the Western Balkan region.

The EU as well has progressively announced the importance of regional cooperation starting with the regional approach of late 1990s, then with the Stabilization and Association process and agreements, and others. For an ordinary “reader” it can be easily qualified as “list of good wishes” and it is more likely to be interpreted as moral support and commitment. The truth is that behind these declarations, there are generators of extremely important long-term policy determination. In order to support the accomplishment of the goals of the regional cooperation in real sense, the EU has so far introduced a number of programs to promote regional cooperation. Amongst the most important in the region of the western Balkans are Interreg, the Phare, the CARDS regional program and the CARDS neighborhood programs.

### **Why is regional cooperation so important: The conceptualization of the original idea for Regional cooperation?**

Theoretically, regional cooperation has various different aspects and seeing it from these perspectives, different priorities could be placed at the focus of regional cooperation.

When speaking about the **political dimension** of regional cooperation we are actually speaking about political stability. Therefore regional cooperation is a crucial ingredient of political stability and conflict prevention as it is written in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and in the Thessaloniki Western Balkans Agenda of June 2003. It is much more important that regional cooperation is accelerator of good political relationship with neighbors and other countries in the region that can significantly help the process of replacing nationalism and intolerance with political dialogue in the region.



Regional cooperation is also extremely important for the **economic growth** within the region mainly by stimulating free trade, energy and transport infrastructure. Balkan countries have already made effort in order to connect themselves with EU states. Trade liberalization and facilitation, for instance the new CEFTA, will provide access to the wider market for practically all products. One aspect of the economic dimension of the regional cooperation that needs closely to be observed is the potential of the recently launched energy (Energy Community Treaty) and air transport (European Common Aviation Area) agreements linking directly the countries of the region with those of the EU. All these experiences and especially the need of them are based exactly on positive results (negative can also be useful) and therefore such initiatives are emerging again and again trying to meet the needs of the region.

Third aspect of regional cooperation refers to maintain **security and justice** in the region through combating organized crime and corruption and strengthening the cooperation among police, prosecution and customs.

### **Scandinavia vs. Balkania**

The truth is that the concept of regional cooperation concept is given priority wherever EU and international community are exposing their opinion and recommendation towards the countries in the region. Moreover it is a permanent message in every single official or nonofficial meeting. First come the good relations and business bondages with the neighbors and after that we can talk on further integration process. This is how simplified, but truth, echoes the EU community message. And of course there is no one who can oppose this fact. But it is not only “the excuse” for EU integration process and easier accessions to NATO alliance why the Regional cooperation should be taken seriously. It is much more about the advantages of its self.

Let us make simple comparative study with Scandinavia as the closest model of what Regional cooperation in SEE should be. The comparison however is not accidental at all, since SEE region and Scandinavian countries have a lot of (geographically, historically and more or less economically characteristics) in common. Scandinavian region Oresund is a current example of where a carefully planned regional cooperation can lead. Oresund (Öresundsregionen) Öresundsregionen contains: Skåne at the Swedish side and Zealand, Lolland, Falster and Bornholm on the Danish side with total area of 20,859 square kilometers and approximately 3,6 millions of people living on that territory. When analyzing the economic figures we can see that  $\frac{1}{4}$  of GDP in Sweden and Denmark is produced in the Ormond region and the growth of 2,7 % is higher compared to the 2,6 average in Sweden and 2% in the EU for last year. Major keys to the success in this region are passport union (since 1954), common informational job centers, employment policy, social security, health care - elements that are currently weakest spots in the western Balkans regional cooperation; elements that can easily serve for the resolution of some “national” problems.

Having in mind the fact that separately each of the country is not only insufficient and minor, but also the interdependencies in the economic and political sense, provides further ground in consolidating the regional cooperation in the region.

It can be assumed that, if regionalization becomes a strong trend in the globalize world, it is very expected that this can lead to a stronger position of small countries and that by forming larger structures their regional interest can be better represented. Thus, the future of the region will seriously depend on how well the region as a whole is composing its own image as sub-regional identity providing space for various exchanges in the region. Regional and sub-regional co-operation in Europe has become particularly important for the EU in the perspective of the Union's enlargement to the East and is an important element in the Union's pre-accession strategy.

However, the potential of success in this endeavor is nil if there is no leverage of the European integration, which should come forward at the earliest convenience. Thus, the EU should gradually assist the region in its efforts to achieve political stability and economic growth and to establish the basis of a sub-European identity that will help smooth the integration of the region into the wider space of the EU.

Although each potential EU member country from the western Balkans region will be assessed individually and eventual decision will be country performance based, further encouragement should be made for the value of developing stronger political or economical ties within the region in reaching the goal of EU accession.<sup>6</sup> No matter how many challenges are there facing regional cooperation, the fact should not be neglected that it is the key element of Stabilization and Association process, which is the framework leading the region towards the EU accession.<sup>7</sup>

But, of course we should not forget that no matter how willing and able the EU is to support regional cooperation, finally the concrete regional initiatives have to come from the countries in the region. Even though the future of the Balkan region depends on many internationally determined circumstances, there are lots of things depending exactly on political will and moreover political maturity of the Balkan governments.

The future of the Balkan countries lies on the road to EU and NATO. Macedonia hosted the NATO EAPC Security Forum, Croatia organized Dubrovnik Adriatic Charter Summit and the Energy forum in Zagreb. They all conveyed optimistic

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<sup>6</sup> Carrots, sticks and norms: the EU and regional cooperation  
in Southeast Europe - Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans  
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<sup>7</sup> Thessalonica Declaration available at: <http://www.stabilitypact.org/reg-conf/030621-thessaloniki/declaration.asp>

scenarios for regional cooperation and improved responsibility and readiness for even more vigorous actions in the field of the regional cooperation.

Summarizing the arguments in favor of the concept of Regional cooperation, we have to state it is a definitely political framework that has been positively influencing the politics in the region over the last years and will hopefully even more justified its existence.

The region has undergone through difficult phase followed by post – conflict consequences, lack of trust and confidence among the countries and many suspiciously accepted challenges. Still, the strong determination to overcome the political and economical isolation and to fully undertake the responsibilities within EU accession process has prevailed. There is no doubt that there are many advantages for the region, but it seems that as a concept Regional cooperation is not seriously advertised, at least not as much as it externally promoted. Truly, political cooperation on bilateral and multilateral level has significantly increased but still, not enough to claim that considerable progress has been made. The Western Balkan countries, more or less are on their road to EU integration and that supposed to be additional motive and conditionality in the same time that will oblige them to establish strong common grounds and principles. Until then, there are lessons to be learnt and models such as Scandinavia from which we can pick precious experience. Whether Balkania will become reality is still a mater of carefully planning, coherence and coordination among countries.